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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 000480

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP, NEA/PI

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KCRM](#) [KWMN](#) [KPAO](#) [OIIP](#) [SMIG](#) [ELAB](#) [MU](#)
SUBJECT: NEGATIVE TIP COVERAGE SHOWS SIGNS OF A COORDINATED
STRATEGY

REF: A. MUSCAT 444
[1](#)B. MUSCAT 464
[1](#)C. MUSCAT 426
[1](#)D. MUSCAT 469

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Alfred Fonteneau, reasons 1.4 b/d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Coverage in both the Arabic and English-language local press of Oman's Tier 3 ranking in the 2008 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report has gone through several distinct stages, with an increasing number of official and civil society actors criticizing the report and the USG. Contacts state that this is part of a coordinated strategy, in which the government is using a compliant media to discredit the report and pressure the USG to revise Oman's status. Post expects the current tenor of local media coverage to continue, with the government attempting to expand its campaign regionally, until Oman is either removed from Tier 3 or finds a face-saving way out of the current impasse. End Summary.

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STAGE 1: Setting the Official Message
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[1](#)2. (C) On June 11, Sayyid Badr al-Busaidi, the Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), issued a strongly-worded press statement that established the terminology and themes of the government's criticism of the 2008 TIP Report to date. He rejected the report's "misleading information" and "incorrect allegations" by calling attention to Oman's "serious cooperation with the international community" in defending human rights and "the tradition, morals and culture of Omani society" that "reject violations of human dignity." In the same message, Badr stressed Oman's "good historical relations with the United States" and stated his hope that "officials at the U.S. State Department would revise the report," implicitly calling for Oman's removal from Tier 3.

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STAGE 2: Shifting to Populist Themes
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[1](#)3. (C) Sayyid Badr's statement set the stage for additional criticism from other government officials and civil society actors, which contacts suggest represents a coordinated media strategy to achieve the government's objectives. By June 15, when the Majlis al-Shura issued its public statement denouncing the TIP report, Oman's message began to assume a more populist tone (ref A). Rhetoric in editorials and statements from civil society organizations like the Oman Journalists Association (OJA) increasingly tied displeasure over Oman's Tier 3 ranking with criticism of the USG's regional policies (ref B). Despite their increased intensity, these statements continued to hue closely to the main points of Sayyid Badr's original message - rejection of the report yet reaffirmation of good bilateral relations.

While government officials generally remained silent during this stage, on June 16, Sayyid Badr made an exclusive statement to the Arabic-language daily "Al-Azzam" to call for "a response from the U.S. administration" to a written rebuttal to specific points in TIP report that he had provided the Ambassador on June 10 (ref C).

14. (C) While coverage of the TIP Report slowed down over the June 19-20 Omani weekend, it picked up again on June 21 with expanded input from different segments of civil society. Local press carried statements from individual Western businessmen - including one American executive based in Oman - questioning the basis of the report (ref D). On June 23, the Acting Chairman of the General Federation of Oman's Laborers (GF) - Oman's national-level worker representative body - issued a statement in Arabic and English papers criticizing the report and supporting the "clear measures" that the government has taken over the past year to combat all forms of labor exploitation and abuse. (Note: The Acting Chairman informed poloff previously that he was considering releasing a statement about TIP, but admitted that he had not read the report. End note.) The June 23 edition of the Arabic-daily "al-Shabiba" carried an article written by the chairwoman of an Oman Women's Association (OWA) chapter near Muscat, which both criticized the report and expressed doubt that Oman could do anything to combat trafficking, including passing anti-TIP legislation, that would "satisfy the arrogance of the U.S. State Department." Criticism of the TIP Report even received coverage in the biweekly entertainment supplement "al-Hayati," which contacts attributed to the government's effort to reach Omanis who do not normally read political commentary.

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STAGE 3: Expanding Regionally

15. (C) In a sign of government efforts to bring its message before a broader regional audience, Reuters carried a June 23 statement by Sayyid Badr reasserting the government's official message that "the (USG's) human trafficking claim is unfounded" because of Oman's strong record of protecting human rights. In addition, Minister of Information Hamad bin Muhammad al-Rashdi made a statement to the Egyptian Daily "al-Akhbar" again rejecting the TIP report while claiming that "the U.S. Administration (has) promised to review the report." Both statements were picked up by the Kuwait News Agency, Arabic Reuters, the UAE News Agency, and Radio Sawa. (Note: The Reuters report blunted Sayyid Badr's comments, however, by combining them with the fact that the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain had taken concrete steps this year to avoid Tier 3, indicating that Oman's tightly-controlled message does not resonate outside the Sultanate. End note.)

Comment

16. (C) The regularity and conformity of the statements by Omani officials, NGOs, and individuals hint strongly at a calculated campaign directed by the government, most likely the Office of the Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to win Oman's removal from Tier 3. Post expects Oman's Tier 3 ranking will continue to receive daily coverage in local media - cycling through the stages mentioned above with more government and civil society actors denouncing the report as baseless and inaccurate - until the Sultanate either achieves its goal or finds a face-saving way out of the current impasse. End comment.

FONTENEAU